

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Thu, Oct. 18, 2012

## Vote could grease skids for Dade's neglected neighborhoods to become cities

By Charles Rabin and Patricia Mazzei  
[crabin@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:crabin@MiamiHerald.com)



MARSHA HALPER / Miami Herald Staff

This bleak site, formerly a Chevrolet dealership, is among several along Northwest 27th Avenue in Miami-Dade County Commissioner Jean Monestime's District 2. It is part of a UMSA (Unincorporated Municipal Service Area) that Monestime envisions as a more thriving area with better streetscapes and new businesses.

Miami-Dade County leaders have spent decades grappling over incorporation, fighting to maintain control of county land and resources against constituents who want a city government closer to home.

The saga resembles a soap opera: Longtime allies spewing insults at each other over new city proposals. Dueling lawsuits. Multimillion dollar payouts to the county from cities claiming extortion.

The latest episode will be written on Nov. 6, when voters decide whether to make it easier for unincorporated neighborhoods to break away from the county. A proposed charter amendment would give residents more time to gather fewer signatures to petition for a new city — and would force county commissioners to approve or deny petitions, instead of delaying them indefinitely, as they have done in the past.

Those changes may seem dry and bureaucratic, but they get to the heart of big

questions about the future of the county. Should Miami-Dade follow Broward and turn all of its neighborhoods into cities, leaving the county to focus on regional issues? And if only portions of Miami-Dade incorporate, what happens to the county's remaining communities?

County Hall leaders have generally resisted allowing relatively wealthy enclaves — and their tax dollars — to "cherry pick" their borders and leave the county, forcing the rest of unincorporated Miami-Dade to make do with fewer resources. Indeed, the difference in quality of life between those living in incorporated and unincorporated neighborhoods is often staggering.

Feeling ignored

It's a stifling hot day along Northwest 27th Avenue in the unincorporated West Little River neighborhood, and a once-thriving Chevy dealership rests almost still, only the tall uncut grass outside lightly blowing in the breeze. Rusted iron gates guard nothing but rotting wood and broken concrete. There are no people around.

Three blocks north, Lewis Washington sits on a chair in his front lawn next to his cousin. They survey the dirt and rock-laden road running along the side of the home Lewis has lived in since 1975.

The road goes on for six blocks. There is no pavement — only holes, water, mud and mats residents have placed over the scarred surface to keep their cars from sinking into the mushy wallow.

"We've been trying to get the road fixed for 20 years now. It never happens," Washington tells his county commissioner, Jean Monestime, who was driving around his district.

Just 12 blocks east, residents of the incorporated Village of El Portal rest under enormous shady oaks, their recently paved streets adorned with new traffic circles. Some fish in the late afternoon from their backyards along the Little River. It's not a rich community by any means, but homeowners fork over a property tax four times higher than their unincorporated neighbors without much hesitation.

The reason, Village Manager Jason Walker says: They have a bigger say in where their money goes.

"All decisions here are local," said Walker, El Portal's top administrator for six years. "You get more things done when you can walk two blocks to your village manager. Whether it's tree trimming or street repair — we get yelled at a lot."

Walker has nine full-time employees. El Portal has 890 homes. The village's operating budget is a mere \$493,330. Village Hall is a converted wooden home along a railroad track with a piano just inside the main door.

Nearly 27,000 people work for the county. Miami-Dade has 308,828 homeowners in its unincorporated areas. The county's operating budget is about \$4.3 billion. County Hall is an imposing, 29-floor high-rise.

"In the county, people and their problems get lost in the shuffle," said Walker, who when he isn't in his cramped office can often be spotted walking the tiny, 75-year-old village.

The difference in the quality of life between El Portal and West Little River — two communities that practically share a ZIP code — is glaring. During his drive through the district, Monestime said he backs cityhood efforts.

"There is no other district with a worse quality of life," he said.

But improved services would require higher taxes — a move the county is unwilling to make and residents in some unincorporated areas do not support.

Fear of more taxes

Among them is Deborah Lamb, 63, who has lived for 42 years in The Falls, one of the more affluent unincorporated neighborhoods in the county. Some in her community have pushed to become their own city, or to join neighboring Palmetto Bay, which last month celebrated its 10th anniversary.

But Lamb is perfectly happy with the services she receives in unincorporated Miami-Dade, including police presence. Pro-incorporation activists often cite a desire for more police patrols as a reason to create new cities.

"Robberies, car break-ins — it happens everywhere," she said.

Lamb fears living in a city would mean paying excessive property taxes.

"Most people in our area are older and live on fixed incomes, and Citizens' [property insurance] is beating us to death," Lamb said. "Cities eventually raise taxes to pay for street signs or whatever."

City residents almost always pay higher property tax rates than those in unincorporated communities. Cities typically form because residents want more services — increased police patrols, for example, or more parks — and those services are expensive.

When Miami Gardens became a city, its new leaders emphasized creating its own police department, a particularly costly proposition. Since the city incorporated in 2003, its tax rate has almost tripled to \$6.36 from \$2.44 for every \$1,000 of taxable property. Despite the jump, apparently satisfied residents have generally reelected the city's leaders.

Doral, which also became a city in 2003, contracts with the county for policing services and has been saving money to eventually form its own department. This year, the city was able to bank \$7.5 million toward a new department, yet the city has not raised its tax rate since incorporating.

Still, residents of unincorporated areas pay lower property taxes.

This year, the owner of a home in Miami valued at \$200,000 with a standard homestead exemption would pay \$1,814.50 in property taxes, while the owner of a home with the same value in an unincorporated neighborhood would pay \$1,432.80. Both homeowners pay a county tax rate, but city residents pay an additional city tax rate. Unincorporated area residents pay an additional county tax rate for the unincorporated municipal service area, or UMSA.

Historically, that tax rate has remained low. This year's rate, \$1.93 for every \$1,000 of taxable property, means if unincorporated Dade were a city, homeowners would have the lowest tax rate of any municipality in the county.

But that comes at a cost. There is less money to pay for services such as road work and sewage repairs. Parks may go longer without being mowed, and park managers are scarce.

The 12 parks in Monestime's district share a single attendant. Soar Park on Northwest 83rd Street and North Miami Avenue is empty on a typical weekday afternoon. Mold has

grown on 30 old shuffleboard courts. The gate is rusted. The parking lot is peppered with potholes; garbage swirls in the wind; power lines hang low.

"We'd like to see someone here all the time," Monestime said. "But there are no services here. Because of budget cuts, we can't afford it."

Earlier this year, Monestime tried to increase the tax rate for unincorporated areas. But he found no political will from his colleagues to do so.

Over the summer, Commissioners Audrey Edmonson, Barbara Jordan and Dennis Moss — then in the middle of heated election campaigns — gave impassioned speeches insisting they could not lower the rate yet again this year, as county administrators proposed. But when they learned that keeping the rate flat or increasing it would require a public tax-hike notice, they all backed off.

Moss, who represents mostly unincorporated communities in South Miami-Dade and has been reluctant to embrace incorporation, now says he has slowly changed his mind. He said he is studying cityhood possibilities in Richmond Heights, West Perrine and Goulds.

As long as elected leaders lack the political will to raise the tax rate for unincorporated areas, he added, there is little hope for improvement in those neighborhoods.

"That's why I've evolved on my take on incorporation," he said.

Those left behind

State legislators forced Broward County's hand a decade ago, mandating the entire county be incorporated by 2010. That hasn't entirely happened; there are still patchworks of poor unincorporated neighborhoods throughout the county. But Broward has mostly incorporated, leaving county commissioners to focus on broader issues like social services, the ports and transportation.

"I can't remember the last time I've seen a zoning issue before us," Broward Mayor John E. Rodstrom said.

The mayor said the incorporation movement has benefited some residents, and hurt others. The main problem: Those left out of the incorporation fold. Cities, he said, cherry-picked the wealthiest of the unincorporated areas, leaving younger municipalities like Lauderdale Lakes struggling to pay bills.

Rodstrom's advice to Miami-Dade was to balance new cities and city expansions, or annexations: "If you're going to start an annexation plan, you should have an end game," he said.

Miami-Dade is not yet willing to go the Broward route.

A heavily pro-incorporation county charter review task force that met earlier this year did not recommend that Miami-Dade move toward incorporating the entire county. Instead, the task force proposed removing commissioners from the incorporation process and allowing new city petitions to go directly to a popular vote.

County commissioners rejected that idea, saying they should referee new city proposals.

The charter amendment before voters on Nov. 6 would extend the time period and lower the signature threshold for cityhood activists to gather signed new-city petitions, and give them six months to collect signatures from 20 percent of the area's registered voters, instead of the current time frame of three months.

The amendment would also require commissioners to vote on a new city petition — not defer it indefinitely as they have done in the past. If approved by the board, the matter would then go to the voters, who would have a say not only on whether to create a new city but also on the city's municipal charter, which acts as its constitution. The current process requires two separate elections.

Though the proposal does not go as far as pro-incorporation advocates had hoped, it would be a step forward for communities that have spent more than a decade pushing for cityhood.

"When people feel connected to local government, they stay in Miami-Dade County and it makes for a stronger civic environment," said Evelyn Greer, an incorporation advocate who helped found Pinecrest in 1996, and served as the village's first mayor. "People feel a sense of pride living in their little town."

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